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NOMINATIONS IN COLONIAL NEW YORK

For the origin of the nominating convention it is necessary to go back to the period which marks the rise of democracy itself—that is, the eighteenth century. The period, that is, which marks the transition from absolutism or aristocracy to democracy will mark also the transition from absolutist or autocratic methods of nomination to democratic methods. In New York this transition was made from a virtual aristocracy to a democracy in the middle and last half of the eighteenth century. It will be necessary therefore to answer the following questions: (1) What were the vital elements in the political life of New York province in the early eighteenth century, and how were nominations made then? (2) When did the transition from aristocracy to democracy begin, and what indications are there of a new method in nominations accompanying this change? (3) To what extent did the new method displace the old before the Revolution?

In 1700 New York was a royal province. Its governmental organization consisted of a governor with his deputy, advised by a council of his own appointment, and a popular assembly which was co-ordinate with the governor and council in legislation. There were established courts of justice and various crown officers besides the governor. But the vital fact in the political history of New York in the early eighteenth century was not the governor, or the council, or the assembly,—was not the organization of the government at all; the vital fact was the existence of a few rich and influential families. Their wealth was based on land and commerce; their influence was the result of ability, social position, and a close organization secured informally by constant, far-sighted, prudential intermarriages. In other words New York was controlled by an aristocracy of wealth and ability, and this control was essentially medieval in its nature—that is, informal and personal. Let us see in more detail how this control was effected, and how, as a part of this control, nominations to elective offices were made.

In the first place, the theatre of operations was small, there were originally but twelve counties¹ covering a narrow strip of

¹ *Colonial Laws of New York* (Albany, 1894), I. 121, 122; *Memorial History New York*, I. 408. Ostrander, *Brooklyn*, 118.

territory on both sides of the Hudson, and Long Island and Staten Island. The number of counties increased with the population, but they were mostly cut out of the old ones, so that by the time of the Revolution New York, territorially, was practically what it had been at the opening of the century.

But New York was not only territorially small ; more important still, what there was of it was largely in the hands of a few men who had benefited by the surviving medieval custom of making large land-grants for personal services. In nearly every county some representative of the coterie of great families held considerable tracts of land and helped to carry out a more or less concerted plan of action. On Staten and Long Island few extensive grants were made during the English period ; but even here the most favored ones were men influential in political life—frequently men, such as Smith and Nicolls, whose chief interests were elsewhere.¹ The wealth of the influential families of New York City and County was based upon industry and commerce rather than upon land, though here too some valuable though comparatively small grants were made. New York was nevertheless pre-eminently a commercial city² and the families which were eminent socially and politically make up the roll of her most famous merchant houses. George and Caleb Heathcote, William Smith and William Smith, Jr., the Crugers, one branch of the Livingston family, the Waltons, Alsops, Van Dams,—these were some of the principal merchant families of New York City, and these are names constantly met with in the political history of the province.

But it was northward along the Hudson that the great landed families lived and exercised an influence which was not limited by their own broad estates, but extended throughout the province and was especially powerful in the metropolis, with whose prominent families they were united by ties of interest or of blood-relationship. The largest part of Westchester County was comprised within the six manors located there ; and in 1769 it is estimated that at least five-sixths of the inhabitants of the county lived within their bounds.³ In Dutchess County large grants were made to Philipse, Heathcote, Beekman, and Schuyler.⁴ In Albany County the Livingston manor spread over seven modern townships, and the great Van Rensselaer

¹ Bayle's *Suffolk*, 197, 226.

² "New York probably carries a more extensive commerce than any [other] town in the English American provinces." Kalm, *Description of the City of New York in the year 1748*, in *Manual of the Corporation* (1869), 845.

³ De Lancey, *Origin and History of Manors in New York*, in Scharf's *History of Westchester County*, I. 91.

⁴ Smith, *Dutchess County*, 43, 44.

manor stretched twenty-four by twenty-eight miles along the Hudson, while still farther north on the Mohawk were the possessions of Sir William Johnson, whose influence was perhaps greatest of all.¹

The above brief summary will serve to indicate the chief families composing the New York aristocracy of wealth and ability. An extraordinary proportion of the wealth—especially the landed wealth—of the province was in their possession, and of the social position and political influence incidental to such possession they made good use—so good indeed, that their names mark every page of New York history in the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century. How, then, was this aristocracy organized for purposes of political control?

It was organized, according to the wont of aristocracies, informally, by as wide intermarriages as possible. Each man had an “*interest*” great or small. If he wished to increase it, it was well to have a large family and contrive to make marriage alliances with as many and important families as possible. The family and the family welfare, socially and politically, was the standard. Thus—to note only a few of the most striking examples—the De Peysters were united with the Alexander,² the Van Cortlandt,³ the Schuyler,⁴ and the Livingston⁵ families. The Heathcotes were allied to the Smith⁶ and the De Lancey families,⁷ and through the De Lancey family to the Philipse,⁸ Van Cortlandt,⁹ Schuyler,¹⁰ and Morris¹¹ families. The Livingstons married into the Van Brugh¹² and Duane¹³ families, and were united with the De Peyster¹⁴ and the

¹ Kip, *Olden Time*, 12, 13. For a map showing exact location of landgrants and manors in New York, see *Documentary History of New York* (1849), I.

² Valentine's *Manual* (1857), 556.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Indeed there were few prominent families of the province who were not related in some way to the De Peyster family. At the funeral of Abram De Peyster, Jr., whose death occurred in 1767, the following families were represented among the relatives of the deceased: Van Cortlandt, Beekman, Bancker, Rutgers, Bedlow, Livingston, De Lancey, De La Noy, Lott, Walton, Cruger, Bayard, Clarkson, Van Horne, Philipse, Schuyler, Stuyvesant, Jay, Roosevelt, etc. *Ibid.*

⁶ Valentine's *Manual* (1864), 665. Caleb Heathcote married the daughter of Chief Justice William Smith.

⁷ By the marriage of Anne Heathcote to James De Lancey. *Ibid.*

⁸ Scharf, *Westchester County*, I. 169.

⁹ Valentine, *History of New York*, 243–244.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Memorial History of New York*, IV. 522, 523.

¹³ *Ibid.*, II. 436 n.

¹⁴ Valentine's *Manual* (1861), 556.

Schuyler¹ families, and more or less closely, therefore, with the connections of these.²

Under such circumstances it is clear that any man of ability who had extended his "interest" judiciously might easily come to have a controlling influence within a faction or a party. A kind of feudal hierarchy would be formed. Having attached to his "interest" a number of the most important families, he would secure through each of them a number of others perhaps less important, and so on down. He would have his machine organized on a personal family basis, rather than on an impersonal "spoils" basis, though the spoils element might not be entirely wanting. Practically this is what happened in New York in the eighteenth century. After some fifty years of intermarriage and political control, two families emerged, each with its following, as the leaders in the struggle which was, though political in some degree, after all very largely personal in its nature. These were the Livingston and De Lancey families;³ and that the struggle was personal rather than political is indicated by the fact that the parties were known by the names of their respective leaders.⁴

So much for a landed and commercial aristocracy and its close personal organization; what were some of the conditions in New York which made easy the political control which it exercised? These were: a limited suffrage; infrequent and irregular elections; a small voting population, the relation of a portion of it to the aristocracy, and the manner of voting; general political indifference among the lower classes.

The franchise was limited to freeholders, and to freemen of the

¹ *Memorial History of New York*, IV. 522, 523.

² This far-reaching and complex network of family relationships among the aristocracy has often been noted. "For more than a century these families retained their position, and directed the infant colony. They formed a coterie of their own, and generation after generation married among themselves." Kip, *Olden Time*, 14, 15; *Memorial History of New York*, II. 604 ff; De Lancey, *Origin and History of Manors*, in Scharf's *History of Westchester County*, I. 130. The best notion of the political significance of these intermarriages may be gathered from the letters of Cadwallader Colden. See *Colden Letter-Book*, I. 362, 363, 459, 468, II. 68, 167, 168, 223, 224, 398, 399: in *New York Historical Society Collections*, Fund Series, IX., X.

³ Dawson, *Westchester County during the American Revolution*, 89. *Memorial History of New York*, II. 223, 570. *Colden Letter-Book*, II. 223, 224. No single man in New York had greater influence, perhaps, than Sir William Johnson; but his influence was due rather to other causes, and he seems to have held somewhat aloof from the partisan strife of the Livingstons and the De Lanceys.

⁴ "It may gratify the reader to know that of the members of the Assembly (1752), Mr. Chief Justice De Lancey was nephew to Colonel Beekman, brother to Peter De Lancey, brother-in-law to John Watts, cousin to Philip Verplanck and John Baptist Van Rensselaer; . . . of the whole house the only member neither connected with Mr. De Lancey nor within the sphere of his influence was Mr. Livingston." Smith, *History of New York*, II. 142, 143.

corporations.¹ The elections were held whenever the assembly was dissolved, sometimes at such short notice that the total voting population, such as it was, could not be got to the polls.² But the whole voting population, on account of the limitations of the suffrage, was small. In 1790 the proportion of voters for assemblymen to the total population was approximately twelve per cent.³ Using this as a percentage previous to the Revolution the voting population increased from 2,168 in 1698 to 20,256 in 1771.⁴ This is a liberal estimate too, because the percentage of people of African birth was less in 1791 than during the pre-revolutionary period.⁵ But even so, the voting population was small and therefore proportionately easy to manage. A voting population of from two to twenty thousand, scattered over twelve counties, gave no great difficulty to an aristocracy as coherent and well organized as that of New York province. And this was made easier still by the personal relation of the aristocracy to a portion of the voting population, and by the method of voting. That tenant voters would be largely influenced by lords of manors is perhaps sufficiently obvious. The method of voting, too, contributed to the same end. It was

¹ "Every freeholder within the province and free man in any corporation shall have his free choice and vote in the election of the representatives." *Colonial Laws of New York*, I. iii. Freeholders were defined, by the act of May 16, 1699, to be those who "have lands or tenements improved to the value of forty pounds in freehold free from all incumbrance and have possessed the same three months before the test of the said writ." *Colonial Laws of New York*, I. 405. Quoted in Dawson's *Westchester County during the American Revolution*, 4, note 3. The date given by Dawson is May 8, 1699. Freemen of the New York Corporation were such as had permission to "use any art, trade, mystery, or manual occupation," within the city save in "times of Faires." Extract from Dongan's Charter, April 20, 1686, quoted in *The Burghers of New Amsterdam and the Freemen of New York, 1675-1866*, in *New York Historical Society Collections*, 1885, p. 48. By this charter such persons were to pay, if merchant traders or shop-keepers, three pounds, twelve shillings; if handicraftsmen, one pound, four shillings. *Ibid.*, 49. But at the Common Council for April 24, 1686, the "fee for freedoms" was made five pounds. *Ibid.*, 48. This seems to have been the law until 1784 when a slight modification was made. *Ibid.*, 239, 240. For the list of freemen admitted in New York City from 1686 to 1776, see *ibid.*, 53-238.

Besides the counties, the manors of Rensselaerwick, Livingston, and Cortlandt, and the borough of Westchester, enjoyed the privilege of sending representatives.

² "As to the present election it was appointed so suddenly by the sheriff that it was impossible to collect the votes of this extensive county, particularly as the roads are so bad and the rivers impassable." William Johnson to Dr. Auchmuty, Jan. 25, 1769. Johnson's MSS., XVII. 51.

³ Based upon "a census of the electors and inhabitants of the State of New York taken in the year 1790." (Broadside in the Library of the New York Historical Society, Vol. I. of the collection) and a "List of electors in New York state for the assembly, reported by a committee of the House, Jan. 27, 1791." (*Greenleaf's Journal*, Jan. 27, 1791.)

⁴ This estimate is made on the basis of statistics presented in the *Documentary History of New York* (1849), I. 689-697.

⁵ *Ibid.*

throughout *viva voce*; every man voted in full knowledge of the candidates and of the powerful leaders.¹ A voter could not be independent in secret; by his vote he proclaimed to the world in whose "interest" he stood. Every voter was watched, we may be sure, and his record was known.² In addition to this the widespread political indifference among the common people, in the rural districts at least, made political control by the aristocracy still more easy.³

By whom, then, and how were nominations made as a part of this political control? They were made practically by the controlling members of the aristocracy, informally and personally. Strictly speaking there was no *method*—nominations were methodless. This assertion rests largely on a lack of evidence rather than on a wealth of it. The very fact that there is scarcely any evidence left to us of how nominations were made tends to show that there was no formal method—tends to show in the light of the conditions just enumerated, that candidates were "set up" by some form of private personal agreement among the two or three men within a county whose "interests" were sufficient to decide the election. Their stand once taken, all who were in their "interest" followed their lead as a matter of course, for this is the essence of the aristocratic method, that men are governed by personality rather than by principle. The question in Albany was not, what are the candidate's principles, but whom is Sir William or Col. Livingston for?

But although the lack of evidence tends to show that this was true because this fashion of selecting candidates, above all others, would leave little trace save in private correspondence, what evidence there is tends to confirm it; and that little is to be gleaned from such correspondence. What has been said of the old aristo-

¹ The method of taking a poll is detailed by the law of May 16, 1699, *Colonial Laws of New York*, I. 406 ff. See also De Lancey, *Manors of New York*, in Scharf's *History of Westchester County*, I. 110. The best notion of what a colonial election was like can be obtained from a description of the election of Lewis Morris to the Assembly from Westchester County in 1733. *New York Journal*, Nov. 5, 1733; quoted in Bolton, *History of Westchester County*, I. 136-139; and given in substance in the *Memorial History of New York*, II. 233.

² A wealthy and influential member of the aristocracy could be opposed by a common man only with some temerity. The view taken of such opposition is well illustrated in the closing lines of the description of the election of Lewis Morris in 1733. "Upon the closing of the poll, the other candidate, Forster, and the Sheriff, wished the late Chief Justice much joy. Forster said he hoped the late judge would not think the worse of him for setting up against him, to which the judge replied, he believed he was put up against his inclinations, but that he was highly blameable." *New York Journal*, Nov. 5, 1733.

³ Dawson, *Westchester County during the American Revolution*, I, ff. Clute, *Staten Island*, 82.

cratic method of making nominations can readily and most fitly be illustrated by extracts taken from the manuscript letters and papers of Sir William Johnson.¹

In May, 1745, the Assembly was dissolved for lack of respect to the governor,² and in the election which followed the services of Sir William were enlisted by the governor, who wished a certain Mr. Holland returned for Schenectady.³ Not long after we find Mr. Holland himself soliciting the aid of his patron thus:⁴ "there is a barrell of the flour wanting, which I suppose Peter left behind him. Your interest in the [ensu]ing election at Schenectady for a representative is desired for your [frie]nd and servt. . . E. H."

Three years later another election occurred. In such a county as Albany the centre of political activity was naturally at the city of Albany, and most of the candidates came from there. That this was often a ground of complaint by outlying districts we may well believe. In this election of 1748 indeed the farmers of Canajoharie were up in arms, threatening to set up a candidate of their own. The following document will explain how the matter was settled through the influence of Johnson.⁵

"Messers.

"Considering how troublesome and inconvenient it would be to all the farmers to have an election at this time of the year, I went immediately to Albany to see to make it up easy now without any trouble. Philip Schuyler and Hans Hansen were sett up by the people of Albany, so I sent for them, and told them if they would do their best for the government of the country we would not sett up anybody against them now, but if they would not do good now for the country we would set up others next time, whereupon they promised me they would do what they could. . . . Now gentlemen and friends I thank you all heartily for your good will for me, as well as if you had voted every bit. I hope when there is another election you will be all as one body to stand by me and put in other good men if these wont do good for us now. For my part I am resolved as I live here to stand by you all for the good of the whole

¹ Sir William Johnson was one of the most influential members of the New York aristocracy. His influence in the northern counties was especially great. On this point see a letter from the Revolutionary committee of the Palatine District of Tryon County, May 18, 1775, *American Archives*, fourth series, II. 637; and Campbell's *Tryon County*, 29.

The letters and papers of Sir William Johnson in twenty-six volumes are in the State Library at Albany. They have been calendared and indexed. Vols. I.-XXII. contain letters and papers arranged chronologically from 1738 to 1774. Vols. XXIII.-XXV. contain letters and papers arranged chronologically from 1733 to 1775. Vol. XXVI. contains private business papers. I am indebted to the courtesy of the head of the Manuscript Department of the State Library for the use of these papers.

² Stone, *Life of Sir William Johnson*, I. 157.

³ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁴ E. H. to Sir William Johnson, June 7, 1745. Johnson MSS., XXIII. 11.

⁵ Johnson MSS., XXIII. 78. This document is in the handwriting of Johnson.

river and hope we will always be true to one another. I am with hearty thanks for all your good will, your true friend and well wisher.

W. J.

To all the Messers of Canajoharie."

This document speaks with no uncertain note of the personal influence of Sir William, at least over the farmers of Canajoharie. But his influence, as we shall see, was not limited to the Mohawk region: it was almost if not quite as great in other parts of the county, and even in the city of Albany itself his name was one to conjure with. "It may easily be seen," writes a correspondent from Albany two years later,¹ "that the intention of the heads here in general are (*sic*) for putting in Coll: Schuyler and Peter Winne, who with their party here work very hard from morning till night and Mr. Collins sends letters to all parts of the county. Mr. De Peyster is very diligent—wether for himself or others is yet a secret to your friends who long to see you here and say if you appeared it would make a great alteration for they confess it is in our power to turn the skeals if you take it in hand."

Factional contests became increasingly sharp towards the time of the Revolution: as early as 1761 competition for the assembly-seat in Albany County had become keen and a number of men were ready to set themselves up. For most of them it seemed desirable, for some it seemed essential, to get the support of Sir William Johnson. The old members, we are told,¹ "propose to advertise themselves this day without the advise of any one of the citizens." But although they may have ignored the magnates of Albany, it does not appear that they found it wise altogether to neglect Johnson. On the same day we find one of them, at least, seeking his aid for the office.² "As the gentlemen here in town propose to set us up for Representatives for the city and County of Albany, and if its agreeable to you we beg your Interest, in which you'll very much oblige us. We remain respectfully, sir," etc.³ A third party determined to run Abraham Yates, the late sheriff, who was, they assured Sir William, "a very good man," and was likely to have "a pretty strong interest," but, "nevertheless we should be glad to know your Inclinations, as we are certain they would be supported by both the manors of Rensselaer and Livingston."⁴

The next election—the last but one in the colonial period—came

¹ Richard Miller to William Johnson, July 3, 1750. Johnson MSS, XXIII. 121.

² David Van der Heyden to William Johnson, Feb. 3, 1761. Johnson MSS., V. 38. The old members were Jacob Ten Eyck and Peter Winne.

³ Jacob Ten Eyck and Volckert P. Douw to William Johnson, Feb. 3, 1761. *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴ David Van der Heyden to William Johnson, Feb. 3, 1761. *Ibid.*, 38.

in the spring of 1768.¹ James Butler, a friend of Sir William's, kept the latter informed of the various candidates. But most people, he writes,² "believe that those you [des]ire will carry the point: there are some that are very faint-hearted, knowing your Interest to be too great for their [strength]." Early in January the report got abroad that Sir William intended to set up a candidate of his own from the Mohawk district—a report which created some consternation at Albany, and occasioned many conjectures and many meetings. The common opinion was that Sir John Johnson must be the intended candidate. For the friends of Sir William, who were constantly urging him to active conflict with the Albany faction, this was good news. "If there is any such intention," writes Cartwright, from Albany,³ "should be very glad to know it. You may depend on the Interest of Cuyler's family, of Hanson's, and many more, who would be glad to know it. Whatever Interest or connection I have you may command in that or anything else." But the rumor was merely a rumor, for we are told that neither "myself nor Sir John had the least thought of his setting up;" but Sir William, nevertheless, had "some reason to think that I could have carried the county without much difficulty."⁴

The last election in New York province came the next year, 1769, and was for the most part only a continuation of the struggle begun the year before. No previous elections were more bitterly contested.⁵ In Albany, as in most places, the personal element was

¹ Meanwhile between the elections of 1761 and 1768 Johnson received a letter from Schenectady, which throws interesting light on the method, or lack of method, in nominations, which prevailed at that time. "I have been thinking on what has for some time passed been advised, which is that I should become a candidate to represent the township in Assembly whenever a vacancy happened, and as my becoming a member . . . might be a means to settle all party affairs here, I shall . . . have no objection in so doing, provided you approve and will favor me with your Interest . . . otherwise I will think no more of it . . . on the other hand, if you think it right I will endeavor with my other friends to make what Interest I can . . . although I am sensible that your Interest alone can do it." John Duncan to William Johnson, Nov. 19, 1763. Johnson MSS., VII. 252.

² James Butler to William Johnson, Dec. 12, 1767. Johnson MSS., XV. 273.

³ Benjamin Cartwright to William Johnson, Jan. 8, 1768. Johnson MSS., XV. 228.

⁴ William Johnson to Hugh Wallace, April 8, 1768. Johnson MSS., XVI. 66.

⁵ The new issues which were coming to the front were cutting into the old factions and separating families long connected by political and social ties. The rupture between the Colden and Clinton families is an example. There is an interesting letter among the George Clinton papers, from the young Cadwallader Colden to George Clinton, relative to this rupture, which throws so much light on the political methods of the time that it is worth reproducing at length.

"Coldingham, Jan. 11, 1769.

"Sir. The heats and animosities created by the last election in this part of the county (and that too among the most intimate acquaintances . . .) gave me such concern that I can't but say that I am truly sorry there is now an opportunity for the renew-

still predominant. Philip Schuyler, one of the old members, owed his position, partially at least, to the interest of Johnson, whose support he had asked at former elections,¹ and his re-election now depended not upon his attitude toward current political questions, but upon his personal relations with Sir William. "I assure you," writes Hugh Wallace,² "this gentleman behaved very badly here, and I am told spoke of you at the Indian Congress with some disrespect. I got into his company and introduced a discourse about that affair, but his tone was different or, by God, his bones would have paid for it. I think you ought to exert your Interest that he should not be returned." The zealous partisan of Sir William goes on to suggest that Sir John be returned in Schuyler's stead, not because Sir John was a fitter man, but because "it would give great pleasure to many of your sincere friends ;" at any rate, "as you have it in your power to send who (*sic*) you please for Albany county, I wish you would stop Coll: Schuyler, and I think you might send a fitter man than poor Myndertse for Schenectady." Johnson replied to Wallace on January 25, stating that he had only recently heard of the "particular you mention with regard to Philip Schuyler." Since then he had received a polite note from Schuyler and the other candidate "requesting my interest again, on which I immediately wrote him as I ought with regard to the report I had heard which he has denied or endeavored to explain away. However I think it necessary to take

ing or continuing those fermentations. . . . I cant question you, for your part, being a ready to promote any scheme that may have a tendency to unite this end of the county again and to restore that friendship that has so long subsisted between you and my father's family ; and I see but one way at present likely to bring this about ; and that is to think of a third person for candidate for this end of the county who was not mentioned in the last election, and consequently not of either party, and such a one there happens to be even within the county,—Mr. Peter Du Bois. Perhaps this will appear to be your son's forsaking his friends and the party he joined at the other end of the county. I cant think this objection of sufficient weight when it is considered that Mr. Du Bois (if of any) must be of the same party. Besides I should leave the people of this end of the county entirely to themselves with regard to the choice of the other member. As a lover of peace and concord I now offer these things to your consideration. I am sensible that it is as little for the private benefit of your son to be in the assembly as it would be for me, and therefore if the influence which one or two gentlemen in New York has over him is such as to put a reconciliation with me out of the question I shall then ever know what to depend upon and perhaps things may take a different turn from what he expects. . . . A little reflection, I think, must induce you to use your influence with your son to comply with [these] proposals. The weight they have with you and him will ever after determine how much I shall be, Sir,

Your Humble Serv't,
CAD' COLDEN JUNR."

George Clinton Papers, I. 11.

¹ William Johnson to the Rev. Dr. Auchmuty, Jan. 25, 1769. Johnson MSS., XVII. 51.

² Hugh Wallace to William Johnson, Jan. 7, 1769. *Ibid.*, 32.

the first opportunity of a personal explanation as he writes in such a manner that *it would not be altogether justifiable in me to condemn him at once.*"¹ Unless this is an exaggerated account of Sir William's influence—and it very likely is to some extent—he seems to have had as sure a grip on Albany County as any modern boss could well have. The difference lies here: the personal influence of a modern boss is secret, working through an open formal organization, and based upon the control of the spoils; the personal influence of Sir William was open, working through a private informal organization, and based to a very considerable extent upon personal attachment. Sir William was not a boss, he was a patron.

If this serves to show what the nature of the aristocratic method of nomination was, it also indicates to what extent this method prevailed down to the Revolution. It is now necessary to retrace our steps and search for the beginnings of the democratic method.

The period from 1730 to 1750 in New York discovers a marked advance in material prosperity and in scientific and literary activity; it is in some senses a renaissance period, having its basis in a growing democratic spirit, a coming consciousness of equality.² It is here we must look for the origin of the nominating convention, which is an incident in the growth of this democratic spirit. The nominating convention is an incident in

¹ William Johnson to Hugh Wallace, January 25, 1769. Johnson MSS., XVII. 52. The same sentiments are expressed in a letter to John Watts, January 26, 1769. *Ibid.*, 56; and in a letter to the Rev. Dr. Auchmuty, who must have made a similar request, he says, "As to the person you particularly mention, he applied to me at his first entrance into the House, and as I had nothing then to urge against him, I made no stir, nor had he any opponents. If his conduct since will justify me, I shall at another opportunity do what is needful, as I have the pleasure to find that conduct which gives me inward satisfaction has produced me an Influence and Interest in this country which it is not in their power to deprive me of." William Johnson to Dr. Auchmuty, January 25, 1769. *Ibid.*, 51. For a more complete account of the trouble between Johnson and Schuyler, see the letter from John Wetherhead to William Johnson, January 9, 1769. *Ibid.*, XXV. 125.

² Judge Jones in his history calls 1750 the golden age in New York and all modern writers have agreed in ascribing to this period a decided intellectual activity, compared, at least, with what preceded. See *Memorial History of New York*, II. 230, 448 ff. 631, 632; III. 115. To be convinced that it was a period of growing democratic consciousness it is only necessary to look through the newspapers and broadsides of the time, and follow through the political discussions which arose, remembering always that this was the logical outcome of the previous years of conflict between the lower house and the governors—between the representatives of the people in the colony and the representatives of the government in England. For example, a broadside, dated September 28, 1736, says, relative to the Van Dam-Clarke controversy, "Every freeman has a right to declare who is entitled to the government and it is no crime in a free one, though it may be in France or Spain. . . . Let every man declare boldly who he thinks entitled, Van Dam or Clarke, and the Corporation it is supposed will act according to the directions of their constituents." Vol. I., of a collection of broadsides in the Library of the New York Historical Society. See other broadsides in the same collection.

the effort of the masses to pull down authority from the top and place it on the ground—an instrument by which they try to get vital control of the business of governing. One thing which aided them in this effort—which was in truth partially the result of it, but which in turn reacted upon it and powerfully confirmed it—was the establishment of newspapers, the extension of printing generally, and the consequent struggle for freedom of speech and the press.¹ In the face of this growing democratic spirit, the very essence of which is individual initiative, the great families found their influence growing weaker, found it less possible to hold a following by mere force of personality. As men came more and more to have opinions of their own and to express them through the newspapers and broadsides, or at least imbibed such opinion as others were thus expressing, the leaders found it increasingly necessary to win over their “Interests” to every measure and every ticket, by force of reason, or what passed for reason, rather than by force of personality. This is simply saying that when men learn that they may have opinions on political questions with *reasons* for them, some broadly generalized theory of political right, or governmental policy, or social change, instead of some powerful personality, will claim their allegiance. This was happening in New York during the middle and last half of the eighteenth century, and the change was followed there as everywhere by the disintegration of old followings, the increase of factions, general political heterodoxy. The old leaders therefore found themselves increasingly under the necessity of extending their influence and harmonizing thought and action, not merely over the field of a narrow oligarchic aristocracy, each member of which was sure of his own following, but over the whole field of those who were politically interested. Marriage alliances, which had been the means for effecting the informal personal organization of the aristocratic period, were no longer efficient or practicable; one could not marry the whole world, and, besides, marriage was a personal bond only; marrying into a man’s family did not mean marrying into his principles, much less the principles of all of the members of that family. The thing that had to be done therefore was this: this growing anarchy of opinion, of individual initiation, had to be harmonized, organized, centralized in a formal and public manner on the basis of principle, instead of, as formerly,

¹ Printing was first introduced into New York in 1693 by William Bradford. He also established the first newspaper in New York, the *New York Gazette*, which dates from the fall of 1725. Of more importance in this connection was the establishment of Zenger’s *New York Journal*, in 1733, as the avowed organ of the popular party. Popular sentiments were freely expressed in this somewhat rabid sheet, and in numerous broadsides which Zenger made a business of printing and circulating.

in a personal private manner on the basis of leadership. Practically we find just this thing happening in New York at this time—the beginnings of the association of individuals, in a more or less public manner, with little in common but their political views, and with no other aim than the accomplishment of a definite political purpose.

I shall now try to illustrate the beginnings of this new method in the period before the Revolution. That these beginnings should be more marked in the cities than in the country, needs, perhaps, no explanation.

As early as 1739 the reeholders and freemen of New York City were informed that "Whereas a great number of the freeholders and freemen of the said city have agreed and resolved to choose the following persons to represent them, to wit: [four names follow]. Your vote and interest are desired . . . at the ensuing election."¹ Though this does not necessarily imply an actual meeting of a formal nature, it does imply an agreement of some sort, and, what is more important, indicates the growing authority of common men in such matters when acting jointly. Likewise at the election of 1743 "a great number of inhabitants," we are told, agreed in a similar manner to support a certain ticket.² Notices of a like nature became more common at the succeeding elections.³

At this time too the practice of writing letters and addresses to the freeholders and publishing them in the newspapers and in broadsides became common. In these addresses the issues were discussed more or less intelligently, the candidates criticized, and information freely given as to the rights of citizens, the duties of legislators and the qualities which it was desirable that public servants should have.⁴ In all of these can be clearly seen the tendency toward organization in a more formal way and on the basis of common political notions.

¹ The *New York Gazette*, Feb. 20–27, 1739. Copied in Valentine's *Manual of the Corporation* (1865), 744.

² Valentine's *Manual* (1865), 751.

³ *New York Post Boy*, Dec. 21, 1747; Valentine's *Manual* (1865), 821; *New York Gazette*, July 30, 1850; Valentine's *Manual* (1866), 643, 697. An amusing squib, entitled, "Political Bill of Mortality," taken from the papers of William Livingston, is printed by Sedgwick in his *Memoir of the Life of William Livingston* (1833), 65. It states that in the month of August, 1750, there were in all 110 political deaths in New York City, three dying "of nocturnal consultations," fourteen "of running about for votes," etc.

⁴ These addresses are too long to be reproduced in full. The *New York Gazette* of Jan. 18, 1748, contains one of three columns, signed, "Freeholder." The author argues against the present members, whom, he finds, it is intended to return. A reply is printed in the same paper, Jan. 25, in which the present members are supported. Such communications become more and more frequent from 1750. Newspapers and broadsides constituted, so to say, the forum of political discussion.

A little later there are some indications of half-clandestine meetings in the nature of caucuses. At first the evidence of these meetings comes in the form of ridicule and burlesque—an indication probably that they had not been at all frequent before.¹ In spite of ridicule, however, these meetings tended necessarily to become more frequent and to take on more and more an open and public character. This need for formal organization found expression also in the foundation of the "Whig Club" in 1752, under the direction of the leaders of the Livingston party.² The club was composed of William Livingston, William Smith, Jr., and John Morin Scott. They met "once in each week at the popular tavern of the King's Arms," and, we may imagine, served as well as possible the purposes for which county and state central committees now exist. Passing over much that would serve still further to illustrate the growing publicity and the tendency toward formal organization in methods of nomination, it will be sufficient perhaps to indicate the stage which had been reached in this development at the last formal elections in 1768 and 1769.

By 1768 the practice of self-nomination had already begun to excite adverse comment;³ for self-nomination was a survival of the old system in that it implied a more or less private and secret agreement behind. It was now passing away as these private agreements were changing into formal public meetings which did their own nominating. By this time, too, the publication of long and elaborate letters and addresses in newspapers and handbills, had come to be a firmly established practice,⁴—a practice to which we

¹ See burlesque in *New York Gazette*, Feb. 3, 1752. In same connection see *ibid.*, Feb. 17.

² *Memorial History of New York*, II. 346. The King's Arms Tavern was located on the northeast corner of Broad and Dock (now Pearl) streets, opposite "Black Sam" Fraunces's tavern. The building was destroyed in 1890; the old Fraunces tavern building is still standing.

³ *New York Mercury*, Feb. 15, 22, 1768.

⁴ See broadside entitled, "The Watchman No. 1," in the New York Historical Society library, Vol. I. of the collection. The article is an attack on the De Lancey family and belongs to the year 1768. See also an address to "The Freeholders and Freemen of the City and County of New York" in the same collection. It probably belongs to the election of 1768 or 1769. The author descants on the blessings of representative government, and exhorts the freeholders to choose men of "Sincerity and Probity and Capacity." He would exact from candidates a declaration "that they will not accept any office of honor or profit under the government . . . while they represent you; that they will do all in their power to get an agent appointed at the court of Great Britain . . . At all events choose men of ability and no Boys." See also, same collection, broadside entitled, "To the Citizens of New York on the present critical situation of affairs," etc. The Lenox Library collection of broadsides of this period and later has been conveniently described and summarized in the *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, Jan., 1899, pp. 23 ff.

look back for the origin of our present convention platforms. But it was not until the final election in the spring of the next year that the new method clearly assumed its first distinctive form—the formal public mass-meeting; by a glance at this election we may perceive how far the new method had developed before the Revolution.

The questions at issue in both elections were for the most part the same. At bottom was the old Livingston-De Lancey rivalry; on the side of Livingston were ranged the dissenters, the lawyers, and the radical anti-British party, while the Church, the merchants, and the compromisers stood by De Lancey. Nevertheless the old personal rivalries were giving way before the coming life-and-death questions of British control, which were cutting into the old factions and rapidly reorganizing parties on a basis of principle instead of on a basis of leadership. This tendency is clearly to be seen in the election of 1769, at the very time when the new methods in nomination are first coming prominently to the front.

The result of the bitter personal contest of 1768 was the election of one member of the Livingston party, Philip Livingston himself, and three of the De Lancey party, James De Lancey, James Jauncey, and Jacob Walton. As the election of 1769 approached, Livingston determined not to be a candidate at all unless there could be a "peaceful election." With other members of his party, therefore, he addressed a letter to De Lancey and Walton, deploring the religious dissensions and proposing a temporary union of the parties by the nomination of a joint ticket, each party naming two candidates.¹ This proposition was rejected, but on January 4 the De Lancey party held a meeting at the Exchange, where they nominated De Lancey, Jauncey, and Walton, and sent a messenger to Livingston offering to make him the fourth member.² Livingston having declined this proposal, the meeting proceeded to fill out their ticket with the name of John Cruger, the mayor.³ The Livingston party had its meeting the very same day, and notwithstanding Livingston's refusal to stand as a candidate for either party unless a compromise could be arranged, proceeded to form a ticket of which he was the head, the others being Peter V. Livingston, Theodorus Van Wyck, and John Morin Scott.⁴ These meetings, it is related, consisted of some hundreds of inhabitants.⁵ They were of course

¹ Sedgwick, *Memoir of William Livingston*, 146, 147. The statement of Sedgwick is based upon a broadside in the New York Public Library. See also the statement of Philip Livingston, *New York Mercury*, Jan. 9, 1769.

² *Memorial History of New York*, II. 396; *New York Mercury*, Jan. 9, 1769.

³ *New York Mercury*, Jan. 9, 1769.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Memorial History of New York*, II. 396.

mere mass-meetings and unorganized, but the unorganized mass-meeting leads directly to the organized nominating convention.

Thus while the old method, previous to the Revolution, retained its hold rather firmly in the rural districts and the upper counties, the new method had attained its first distinctive form, at least within the city of New York. The Revolution itself gave a powerful impetus to the new method, and practically destroyed the old. It destroyed the old by breaking up and driving out the old aristocracy ; gave a great impetus to the new by teaching a minority the uses of formal organization—mass-meetings, committees, resolutions, chairmanships, and rules of order. When the Revolution was over, and the new elective offices were to be filled, these lessons were not forgotten.

CARL BECKER.